

Following the Beaten Track: A sociology of knowledge perspective on disinformation and its effects on democratic discourse

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Democracy in Flux
Order, Dynamics and Voices in Digital Public Spheres

Following the Beaten Track

A sociology of knowledge perspective on disinformation and its effects on
democratic discourse

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With recent political events, disinformation has emerged as one of the apparent major threats in political debates in highly connected democracies. It looms large in the socio-political debate on the quality of democracy, but also in international security discourse it is perceived as one of the core elements of (digitally enhanced) information warfare. Thus, it is likely to shape both future measures of internet governance, in particular content regulation, as well as international conflict.

Research on disinformation has developed techniques to detect false stories and to measure its impact mostly at the level of individual behaviour (Lazer et al., 2018; Gorrell et al., 2015). Other works have focussed on the spread of individual pieces of disinformation (Vosoughi & Aral, 2018). Several studies have put emphasis on cross-media effects of disinformation e.g., on election results (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Jamieson, 2018). Despite widespread concerns about the so-called disinformation order (Bennett & Livingston, 2018), most empirical studies feed into a growing consensus that there are no readily available tools to malevolent actors for significantly swaying public opinion through information operations (Rid, 2020; Lanoszka, 2019). However, there is only little knowledge about structural and persistent effects of disinformation at the societal level (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021). To address those concerns and to study the structural dimension of information operations, we propose a theoretical reorientation towards a sociology of knowledge perspective. Thereby, we avoid individualistic misconceptions of politically relevant knowledge (Schünemann, 2018; Dunn Cavelty, 2008). Knowledge goes beyond information. It is not just the sum of single bits of information. Information needs to be interpreted based on social knowledge orders. Therefore, knowledge is not a feature of an individual or at its disposal but is necessarily constructed and processed in societal discourses.

Empirical research in the field so far has paid attention mostly to the disruptive novelty of disinformation, or the alleged inaccuracy of particular pieces of information. However, it may be more illuminating to understand successful disinformation campaigns as informational exploits of given vulnerabilities in targeted discursive formations. Instead of expecting disinformation to change public opinion, we conceive it as strategically confirming embedded social knowledge orders. For example, disinformation campaigns frequently propagate various salient and sensitive narratives simultaneously, which are often mutually contradictory, but share an inflammatory nature (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). We hypothesize that information operations utilise and reinforce pre-existing issues and fault lines in a society to maximise disruptive effects. Such a revised conception might help to explain the heterogeneous set of actors and motivations behind disinformation campaigns within and across countries, it can improve attribution assessments based on a *cui-bono*-logic and would help to better grasp the catalytic effects of attentional mechanisms in (digital) media ecosystems.

This paper empirically tests the aforementioned hypothesis through a thorough analysis of corpora of news articles from Germany and France published between 1 January 2019 and 30 June 2019. These dates comprise the culmination and aftermath of the 2019 European elections campaign, which has been identified as a prime target for foreign actors to conduct large-scale disinformation campaigns (European Parliament Resolution 2019/2810(RSP), 2019). Since it is the objective of this paper to identify the ebb-and-flow of a disinformation campaign, and how it relates to public discourse, the suspected disinformation corpus is collected from *Russia Today* (RT). This news outlet has been identified as one arm of the Russian influence apparatus abroad, which includes disinformation operations (Elsawah & Howard, 2020). RT is a particularly useful case to study due to its presence in multiple countries and multilingual content. This allows for comparisons on country- and language-

level, which will help in identifying any potential country-specific features of disinformation campaigns. The two countries were chosen because in comparative studies (EUvsDisinfo, 2021) they appeared as the main targets of information operations attributed to Russia. Moreover, there is a German and French version of RT available. It seems particularly illuminating to assess disinformation campaigns in non-Anglophone countries, since much of the existing literature has already covered the latter extensively. In order to gather a representative sample of mainstream news media, which also serves as a representation of the respective general public discourse, we built corpora with news articles from one regular newspaper and one tabloid newspaper: *Die Welt* and *Bild* for Germany, and *Le Figaro* and *France Soir* for France. This yields a dataset that we think is both manageable and sufficiently representative for the media landscapes in both countries.

The articles used in the dataset were scraped from the German and French websites of RT, as well as from the *France Soir* website, while the articles from *Die Welt*, *Bild* and *Le Figaro* were downloaded from LexisNexis. These datasets are curated and analysed using R tools for text-mining. We use Structural Topic Modelling for our analysis, as it allows to estimate covariate effects on topic distribution for both the various news outlets, as well as the timeline in which trends and/or clusters of topics emerge. Coming from our social-constructivist perspective, we expect RT information operations to align to socio-culturally specific patterns of public discourse. Therefore, we expect cross-country variation in topical orientation. Moreover, as to the temporal variation, we expect RT to ‘follow’ the newspapers on divisive topics, rather than ‘planting the seeds’ for a dominant topic. We hypothesise that RT will do so in an amplifying manner, using more galvanising language than the quality newspapers in the dataset.

Preliminary findings from the German case study suggest that RT stands out most from the mainstream newspapers through its substantial coverage of issues that are salient and likely to evoke strong emotions. Topics that RT covers more extensively than its more mainstream counterparts include migration, migrant criminality, Brexit, alternative perspectives on politics and Russia. Conversely, less emotionally charged topics, such as those related to finance, health and party politics, receive far less attention from RT than from mainstream news outlets. These findings are commensurate with the expectation that disinformation latches onto potentially disruptive issues present within the society that it targets. Further analysis on topical orientation and publication timeline should give more insight into the relationship between cases news outlets. These findings will be presented in the final paper, combined with an assessment of how they may or may not fit within the discourse of their respective societies.

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